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MIGRATORY FARMWORKERS IN NEW YORK STATE, 1959 AND COMPARISONS WITH 1953, 1957, and 1958

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A Progress Report

By Donald R. Whyte, Emmit F. Sharp, Olaf F. Larson and Nelson L. LeRay 1/

This progress report provides a summary of some of the results of research studies of migratory farmworkers employed in New York agriculture.

The 1959 study provides information on the current migrant farm labor force. This study, taken in conjunction with those of 1958, 1957, and 1953 indicates both year-to-year fluctuations and long-term trends in the migrant labor situation. These studies were made during a period of rapid technological change in agriculture, especially in harvest operations. The studies cover a period of business recession and comparatively high levels of unemployment in nonfarm jobs, and also include periods of high nonfarm employment levels. 2/

One feature of the 1959 study, in contrast with those of previous years, is that it includes information on Puerto Ricans in the migrant farm labor group. Previous studies dealt only with Negroes, who make up the bulk of the migratory farm labor force in New York State.

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2/ For additional material based on these studies see Larson, O. F., and Sharp, E. F., Migratory Farm Workers in the Atlantic Coast Stream: Changes in New York, 1953-1957, New York (Cornell) Agr. Expt. Sta. Bul. (In Press); Sharp, E. F. and Larson, O. F., Migratory Farm Workers in the Atlantic Coast Stream: Education of New York Workers and Their Children 1953-1957, New York (Cornell) Agr. Expt. Sta. Bul. (In Press); Sharp, E. F., Larson, O. F., and LeRay, N. L., Migratory Farmworkers in New York: Changes, 1953, 1957 and 1958. U. S. Dept. Agr., ARS 43-105, August 1959.

PURPOSE OF REPORT

This report is intended to summarize the research findings on:

(1) Changes in the size of the out-of-State seasonal farm labor force in New York State and factors affecting the size of this labor force;

(2) Changes in the composition of the Negro migratory labor force, 1953 to 1959;

(3) Changes in the employment and earnings of Negro migratory workers, 1953 to 1959;

(4) Composition and employment and earnings of Puerto Rican seasonal farmworkers, as reported in the 1959 study;

(5) Employment and earnings in farm and food-processing work within New York State, as found in the 1959 study.

SOURCES OF INFORMATION FOR THE REPORT

Data for this report are from surveys of migratory workers and their families made in 1953, 1957, 1958, and 1959, and from surveys of migrant labor employers made in 1958 and 1959. These surveys were made during the months of August and September in order to sample the migrant population at or near its peak. Information was obtained directly from workers and employers by trained interviewers. The samples were selected statistically in such a way as to be representative.

Samples for the four worker surveys were drawn from lists of all farm and food processing labor camps registered with the New York State Health Department during the previous year. In 1953, 1957, and 1958, worker interviews were limited to domestic Negro migrants who account for about three-fourths of all out-of-State seasonal farmworkers in New York State. In 1959, the worker interviews were not restricted to Negroes but included all categories of workers in the camps sampled. Included in 1959 were several camps with Puerto Rican workers, from whom information was obtained by Spanish-speaking interviewers.

In 1959, interviewing of workers took place in 73 camps in 23 counties of the State and resulted in information on 511 workers and 112 nonworkers. Of the 511 workers for whom information was obtained in 1959, 80 percent were Negroes and 16 percent were Puerto Ricans. The remaining 4 percent of the workers were Jamaicans, Bahamians, Mexicans, and whites. Eighty-seven percent of the nonworkers were Negroes and 11 percent were Puerto Ricans, leaving only 2 percent in other categories.

Comparable information on samples for other years, when information was obtained only for Negro migrants, is as follows:

Year	Counties	Camps	Workers	Nonworkers
1958	27	76	805	205
1957	18	52	942	244
1953	15	39	650	257

The sample for the survey in 1959 of employers on which estimates of numbers of workers are based numbered 76; all of these were operators of camps in which workers were interviewed. In 1958, the sample of employers included 102 camp operators.

The four surveys were made by the New York State College of Agriculture under cooperative or contract arrangements with the Farm Economics Research Division, Agricultural Research Service, U. S. Department of Agriculture.

CHANGES IN SIZE OF THE MIGRATORY LABOR FORCE

In both the 1958 and 1959 surveys, employers who were operators of farm labor camps were asked to give information on: (1) The peak number of workers (Negro, Puerto Rican, and other) housed in their camps during the previous year; (2) the peak number that had been, or would be, housed in their camps during the survey year; and (3) the expected peak number for the forthcoming year. If changes were indicated, the operators were asked why such changes had occurred. This information is summarized as follows:

The decline in numbers of migratory workers reported between 1957 and 1958 continued between 1958 and 1959 and a further decline is predicted by camp operators for 1960. The information supplied by the operators in the 1958 sample indicated that 17 percent fewer workers were in these camps in 1958 as compared with 1957. The same operators predicted that they would have 10 percent fewer workers in their camps in 1959 than they had in 1958. The 1959 operator sample revealed that there were 16 percent fewer workers in their camps at the peak of the season in 1959 than in 1958. Therefore, the decrease in number of workers in the camps in 1959 was greater than the operators surveyed in 1958 predicted. The operators in the 1959 sample predicted that they would have 14 percent fewer workers in their camps in 1960 than they had in 1959.

The decline in numbers reported employed resulted from both a reduction in the number of workers housed in certain camps and the closing of a small number of sample camps during or prior to the two survey periods. The amount of decline is doubtless overstated, since the samples, as drawn,

would not include new camps opening for the first time in the survey year. However, there appears to be little doubt that the number of migratory farmworkers in New York State has declined to a significant extent.

The development and adoption of new agricultural technology is a major factor in the decline in employment of migratory workers. The mechanical snapbean harvester is the machine having the greatest immediate effect on migrant labor requirements. More widespread adoption of this machine throughout the bean-growing areas of the State is necessitating adjustments in number of migrants employed and in the length and continuity of the period of employment.

In 1953, the mechanical beanpicker was experimental. In 1957, about 73 were reported in operation. In 1958, this number had grown to 113, while in 1959 about 140 machines were reported in use throughout the State.

Other machines that have had some influence on the number of migrants employed and the length of time during which they are required include the onion harvester, sweetcorn harvester, and potato picker. Handling techniques, such as the use of the fork lift, flats or pallets in orchards and fields, and portable tanks for cherries reduce labor requirements, as does chemical weed control. If the mechanical cherry picker is developed successfully and accepted by growers, it will replace a considerable number of migrants during the next few years.

Operator samples in both 1958 and 1959 reveal that the greatest relative decline in worker numbers occurred in camps housing more than 150 migrants and in those housing fewer than 25 migrants. Camps of intermediate size show the greatest stability. A net decline between 1957 and 1958 of 31 percent in number of workers housed was reported by operators of sample camps housing 150 or more migrants in 1958. A decline between 1958 and 1959 of 17 percent in number of workers at the seasonal peak was reported by the corresponding group of operators interviewed in 1959. In camps housing fewer than 25 migrants in 1958, a decline of 21 percent in numbers was indicated between 1957 and 1958 while the corresponding decline between 1958 and 1959 was reported at 22 percent. For the intermediate size group of camps, declines of 8 and 10 percent, respectively, were reported for the two periods.

THE NEGRO MIGRATORY LABOR FORCE

The following information summarizes the composition, characteristics, employment, and earnings of the Negro migrant labor force for the 4 study years. The figures show stability in some characteristics, trends in others, and in still others, wide year-to-year fluctuations which arise entirely from conditions that exist only during a particular year.

Changes in Composition

The proportion of the total Negro camp population made up of workers is increasing. In 1959, 81 percent of the Negro migrant population was made up of workers as compared with 80 percent in the previous year. In 1957, workers comprised 79 percent of the total population, while in 1953, only 72 percent were workers. These figures indicate a trend toward a larger proportion of workers in the migrant stream of Negroes and fewer nonworkers.

The percentage of Negro workers who are males has remained at about the same level for 3 years. Seventy percent of the Negro workers were males in 1959, as compared with 73 percent in 1958, and 72 percent in 1957. In 1953, however, only 58 percent of the workers were males.

The age distribution of the total Negro migrant population (workers and nonworkers combined) shows some year-to-year fluctuations but has remained generally similar for the study years of 1953, 1957, 1958, and 1959. The proportion of the total population 45 years of age and over was 15 percent in 1959, 14 percent in 1958, 17 percent in 1957, and 12 percent in 1953.

In each of the 4 study years, 50 percent or more of the total population were between the ages of 20 and 44. Percentages by years were: 1959, 53 percent; 1958, 52 percent; 1957, 50 percent; and 1953, 50 percent.

Persons aged 14 to 19 comprised 14 percent of the total migrant population in 1953 and 1957. In 1958, they made up 16 percent, but in 1959, this proportion again declined – to 14 percent.

The proportion of children under 14 years of age has shown a slight decline since 1953. In 1958 and 1959, 18 percent of the total Negro migrant population was under age 14. The corresponding figures for 1957 and 1953 were 19 and 23 percent. These figures indicate a trend toward fewer children in the total Negro migrant population coming into the State.

The age distributions of Negro migrant workers were generally the same in the 4 study years, with no consistent patterns of change evident in the broad age groups. The percentages of workers in each age group were as follows:

Year	Under 20 (percent)	20 to 44 (percent)	45 and over (percent)	Total (percent)
1959	18	63	19	100
1958	19	64	17	100
1957	18	61	21	100
1953	18	66	16	100

The percentage of Negro workers with previous migratory work experience in New York State showed an increase up to 1958, but decreased slightly in 1959. In 1953, 56 percent of the workers had previously done crop work in New York State. The corresponding figures for 1957 and 1958 were 60 and 65 percent. In 1959, this percentage decreased to 62, indicating that in that year, more of the workers than in 1958 were doing crop work in New York State for the first time.

There appears to be a trend toward more Negro workers who are experienced in crop work, with fewer inexperienced workers in the migrant stream reaching New York. Seventy-four percent of the Negro workers in the 1959 sample said they had had previous experience in crop work. This compares with 75 percent of the sample workers in 1958, 72 percent in 1957, and 68 percent in 1953. Another measure of turnover and experience is the percentage of workers who began crop work within the last 4 years. For the last 2 years, this percentage has been slightly lower than in the two earlier years of study. In 1959, 52 percent of the workers indicated that they had begun crop work within the last 4 years. The earlier percentages were 48 percent in 1958, 57 percent in 1957, and 54 percent in 1953.

Apparently the pattern of origin of the Negro workers is not consistent. The proportion of workers indicating Florida as the place of winter residence was 71 percent in 1959, as compared with 72 percent in 1958, 61 percent in 1957, and 76 percent in 1953.

In 1953, two-thirds of the workers gave Florida or Georgia as their place of birth. The corresponding figure declined to 47 percent in 1957, but rose again to 52 percent in 1958. In 1959, only 44 percent gave one or the other of these States as their birthplace.

The number of Negro workers indicating work in crops as their major occupation during the previous year remained about the same in the four studies. Of the total Negro worker population, 46 percent of the 1959 sample gave work in crops as their major occupation during the previous 12 months. In 1958, the proportion was 40 percent, while the figures for 1957 and 1953 were 43 and 42 percent, respectively.

Employment and Earnings

Many Negro migrants who do crop work in New York State work only part of the year; many others have other employment or unpaid activities during part of the year. The earnings given below are for all employment and so include wages from nonfarm as well as farm work. The figures showing average employment and earnings represent both male and female workers of all ages.

The average number of days worked by Negro migrants has been decreasing since 1953. Negro workers of all ages and both sexes in the 1959 sample averaged 183 days of wage work during the 12 months preceding interview. The 1958 sample showed an average of 184 days, while Negro workers in 1957 and 1953 averaged 188 and 208 days, respectively. The decrease in 1958 reflected the effect of winter freezes in Florida in December 1957 and January 1958, which influenced the amount of crop work available. It reflected also the decrease in nonfarm employment opportunities associated with the business recession of 1957-58.

The amount of work performed in New York by Negro migrants remained about the same. In 1959, Negro workers reported an average of 53 days worked in New York locations during the preceding 12 months. This compares with 51 days in 1958 and 53 in 1957. No comparable figures are available for 1953. The decrease in total average annual employment for these workers is accounted for by the decrease in employment opportunities outside New York State.

Average annual earnings reported for Negro workers in 1959 declined, compared with 1958. In the 1959 survey, workers averaged $1,221 cash earnings from all wage work during the preceding 12 months compared with an average of $1,262 for 1958. The comparable figure for the 1957 workers was $1,205. No data on average earnings are available for the workers in the 1953 survey. However, an analysis of the distribution of these workers by income categories indicates that their average annual earnings were well below the 1957 averages.

Average daily earnings of the 1959 Negro worker population declined, compared with 1958. The average daily earnings for Negro workers in 1959 was $6.69, slightly less than the average figure of $6.85 reported in 1958. Both, however, are higher than the $6.42 figure reported in 1957. It should be noted that this is a more realistic figure than average annual earnings as the inclusion of part-time workers results in a low average figure for annual earnings.

Total earnings reported in 1959 from work in New York locations remained about the same. Negro workers in 1959 reported average earnings in the State at $329 within the preceding 12 months, a decrease from $340 in 1958 but higher than the averages of $319 and $324 for 1957 and 1953, respectively.

Average daily earnings in New York State reported by Negroes in 1959 have declined, compared with 1958. An average of $6.17 in wages per day for all types of work was reported by workers in the 1959 sample. This compares with daily earnings of $6.71 in 1958, and $6.09 for 1957.

Males aged 25 to 34, one of the most fully employed age-sex groups among seasonal farmworkers, show decreased employment, little change in annual earnings, and increased daily earnings. In describing the annual employment and earnings situation among workers employed on New York farms for a part of each year, there is a decided advantage in referring to a specific age-sex group rather than lumping both men and women and workers of all ages into an overall average. Each year, the studies have shown that adult men under 45 have the greatest amount of work for wages and the highest annual earnings from wage work.

In 1959, men aged 25 to 34 reported that they had worked an average of 211 days for wages during the last 12 months (compared with 183 days for all Negro workers). They had $1,686 from wage work (compared with $1,221 for all Negro workers). Their average daily wage rate was $7.99 (compared with $6.69 for all Negro workers). Of this group, 29 percent reported total wage incomes of less than $1,000, 17 percent between $1,000 and $1,499, 22 percent between $1,500 and $1,999, 19 percent between $2,000 and $2,499, and 13 percent $2,500 and over.

For this group, the year's work for wages represented a decrease from the 246 days reported in the 1953 study, while annual earnings changed little because wage rates increased.

THE PUERTO RICAN MIGRATORY LABOR FORCE

Of the total 1959 sample population studied, 15 percent were Puerto Ricans. Eighty-seven percent of these were workers, and these workers comprised 16 percent of the total migrant worker population.

Composition, With Comparisons Between Negro and Puerto Rican Male Workers, 1959

Ninety-three percent of the Puerto Rican migrant sample consisted of males, and the same percentage of the Puerto Rican males were workers. There were no female workers among the Puerto Ricans in the sample. Because all of the Puerto Rican workers were males, comparisons are with Negro male workers only. This excludes the 30 percent of the Negro workers who were females.

The age distribution of the Puerto Rican workers differs considerably from that of the Negro male worker population. Only 10 percent of the Puerto Rican workers interviewed were 45 years of age or older as compared with 20 percent of the 1959 Negro male worker sample. Eighty percent of the Puerto Ricans were between the ages of 20 and 44, as compared with only 62

percent for the Negro males. In 1959, 10 percent of the Puerto Ricans but 16 percent of the Negroes were between the ages of 14 and 19 years.

The majority of the Puerto Rican workers gave Puerto Rico as their place of winter residence. Seventy-two percent had spent the previous winter in Puerto Rico. Florida was indicated as their winter residence by 22 percent, while the remaining 6 percent had spent the previous winter in other States.

A larger proportion of Puerto Ricans than of Negro male workers gave work in crops as their major occupation during the previous year. Fifty-four percent of the Puerto Rican workers gave crop work as their major occupation during the 12 months preceding interview, as compared with 48 percent of the Negro male workers.

Puerto Rican workers have more experience in crop work than Negro male workers Puerto Rican workers who had done crop work in New York State before made up 70 percent of all such workers as compared with 63 percent for Negro males. Eighty-six percent of the Puerto Ricans and 75 percent of the male Negroes had had previous experience in crop work. However, 57 percent of the Puerto Ricans as compared with only 52 percent of the Negro males indicated that they had begun crop work within the last 4 years.

Employment and Earnings, With Comparisons Between Negro and Puerto Rican Male Workers, 1959

Puerto Rican workers averaged fewer work days than Negro male workers. The 1959 survey showed that Puerto Ricans averaged 186 working days during the previous year, while the male Negroes averaged 199 days.

Puerto Rican workers averaged more time in New York locations than did Negro males. In the 1959 study, 77 days were reported as worked in New York within the last 12 months by Puerto Ricans, as compared with 56 days for male Negro workers.

Average annual earnings for Puerto Rican workers proved to be considerably lower than for Negro male workers. Puerto Rican workers interviewed in 1959 had an average income from wages of $1,006 for the previous year. This is considerably less than the average income of $1,434 reported for male Negro workers.

Puerto Rican workers had a lower average daily wage than did their male Negro counterparts. The male Negroes averaged $7.21 per day for the work reported in the 1959 study, as compared with a daily average of $5.40 for all wage work done throughout the year by Puerto Rican workers.

Total average earnings in New York State were higher for Puerto Ricans than for male Negroes. Average earnings within New York during the last year were reported in 1959 as $468 for Puerto Ricans and only $364 for the Negroes.

Average daily earnings of Puerto Ricans and those of male Negroes in New York locations showed little difference. Puerto Ricans averaged $6.09 per day in New York, slightly lower than the daily average of $6.50 for Negro male workers for all types of work in the State.

EMPLOYMENT AND EARNINGS IN FARM AND FOOD-PROCESSING WORK WITHIN NEW YORK STATE

All of the workers for whom information is included in this report were included in the studies because they were migrants engaged in seasonal farm and food-processing work within New York. However, all of the data presented on employment and earnings includes all work done for wages whether farm or nonfarm. There is, therefore, a special interest in separating out the part of the employment and earnings while in New York which applies specifically to farm and food-processing work.

The 1959 study showed that of the 53 days reported by Negroes as having been worked in New York locations within the last 12 months, an average of 41 were in crop work and 6 in food processing. For Puerto Ricans, of the 77-day total, 54 were in crop work and 16 in food processing.

Of the total of $329 earned from all sources in New York by Negro workers on the average, $234 was from crop work and $45 from food processing. For Puerto Ricans, of the $468 total New York earnings, $316 came from crop work and $135 from food processing.

Compared with the average daily wage earnings of $6.17 reported by Negroes for all work done in the State, $5.69 was reported for crop work and $7.13 for food-processing work. For all Negro males, the average reported for crop work in New York was $5.95 compared with $5.90 for Puerto Ricans and $5.00 for Negro females. For food processing, the Negro males reported a daily average of $7.31, compared with $8.42 for Puerto Rican males and $6.56 for Negro females.